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# AN EXPERIMENT IN A PRIMARY CLASS

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The following is an account of a year's work in a beginners' class in a small Sunday school in a rural-suburban neighborhood. Part of the time the class enrolled sixteen pupils ranging in age from three to ten years. Later the class was divided, leaving the younger ones, from three to six, the majority being five and six years old. The work was best suited to the younger children, those below school age.

When I took the class, I consulted all the more widely advertised beginners' and primary courses, and found what seemed to me four objections to them.

First, they seemed to be written for city rather than country children.

Second, the material was mainly taken from the Bible and was remote from the child's experience in spite of every effort to bring it within his range.

Third, each course was devoted largely to the inculcation of the practical virtues appropriate for young children. Such teaching, even though done by presentation of a concrete example in story form, is essentially abstract, since there is only the smallest opportunity for the practice of these virtues in Sunday school. Training in daily conduct is a responsibility of the home rather than the Sunday school.

Fourth, each course attempted to cover too much ground with too little variety of method. Young children's

ability to grasp abstract ideas is confessedly limited. Yet Sunday-school teaching, under the best of conditions, must be largely the presentation of what have been called "free ideas"—abstract truths not immediately expressed in action. For young children, then, who can take home from each lesson only a vague and fragmentary impression, the continued presentation of the same idea in varied forms is best.

Such were my objections to the material I found available. Moreover I am firmly convinced of the necessity which Mr. Herbert Wright Gates pointed out to the Religious Education Association of "greater freedom for variation within the curriculum in order that individual needs may be more exactly served. Our schools need to adopt graded curricula within which each teacher may have the choice of a wider range of material as may best suit the needs of his or her particular class, rather than to be held to any one fixed course of study which allows no such range of choice."<sup>1</sup> An intelligent teacher can teach better and with more enthusiasm lessons which he or she works out than those prescribed in any course, however good, made by another. The teaching of religion, above all other teaching, calls for the personal note, the influencing of one personality by another personality, and it is the personal conviction which the teacher puts into her

<sup>1</sup> *Religious Education*, August, 1914, pp. 352-53.

lesson which will most influence even the youngest pupils.

Another conviction with which I started on my experiment was that the teacher's first task is to study her pupils and to adapt the lessons to their needs. As Professor Richardson has said, "The practical starting-point is that of the present moral and religious tone of the pupil's conduct. The teacher should be sufficiently independent of the curriculum to find this starting-point. . . . As a part of his preparation to teach he should obey the classic injunction: 'Come, let us live with our children.' The teacher who is of mature Christian character [should] spend half of his time in trying to discover the plane on which the members of his class are living, and [should] consider it his chief affair to lift their conduct up toward Christ's mode of life."<sup>1</sup>

With such convictions, I asked myself, What should be the general aim of elementary Sunday-school instruction? Not training in conduct—but teaching which will bring the thought of God into their daily experience. Thus we shall be giving Christian teaching, even though the material of instruction is taken from the children's daily experience and Jesus is seldom mentioned. Jesus as a historical person can mean little to a young child; as a theological person, nothing. On the other hand, if the teacher, herself imbued with Jesus' spirit and teachings, teaches the pupils to assume his attitude toward God the Father, she is laying the foundation of their Christianity, though the source of the teaching is left to be learned in later years. The

primary aim of the course, then, is to bring God the Father into the children's daily lives.

But Jesus' second cardinal principle—the brotherhood of man—is not to be entirely neglected. A beginning may be made in training in social sympathy, even though the child's social experience is mainly confined to the family group. The principle governing such training in social sympathy while embracing service from the more fortunate to the less fortunate should not ignore that service to equals which is as important and the spirit of which is vastly more difficult to inculcate. "The social service that is supreme," says Edward Alsworth Ross, "is not some bit of charitable work, but the following of one's calling as service, not as exploit. Education for social service is to open the eyes of the young to the social nature of their work in life."<sup>2</sup> Even beginners in Sunday school are not too young for suggestion to them of social sympathy with the workers who make the blessings of their own life possible, and of aspiration to do their small part, which shall grow greater as they grow older.

With such aims, what material was available with these country children? The two main factors in their daily environment and experience were their home life and the nature-world about them, and the course was organized on the basis of these two factors.

When winter weather was keeping the children pretty closely confined to the house, the general subject of the lessons was, The Home as the Product of Natural Resources Given by God and Made Available for the Co-operative

<sup>1</sup> *Religious Education*, June, 1914, pp. 279-80.

<sup>2</sup> *Survey*, August 29, 1914.

Services of Many Workers. The order of topics was as follows:

Lesson 1. Introductory. The House—as a winter shelter, the product of man's fingers, brain, co-operation, all gifts of God.

Lesson 2. Construction of Houses—building materials; workers—architect, contractor, carpenters, lumbermen, stone masons, etc.

Lesson 3. House Furnishings. Materials and workers.

Lesson 4. Heating of Houses. Materials and workers.

Lesson 5. Lighting of Houses. Materials and workers.

Lesson 6. Facilities for Eating. Materials and workers.

Lesson 7. Facilities for Cooking. Materials and workers.

Lesson 8. Facilities for Sleeping. Materials and workers.

Lesson 9. Clothing. Materials and workers.

Lesson 10. Facilities for Making and Storing Clothing. Materials and workers.

Lesson 11. Transportation of House Furnishings (from factory to store). Materials and workers.

Lesson 12. Purchase of House Furnishings (retail commerce). Materials and workers.

Lesson 13. The Family's Work—in return for all the benefits it receives from God and man.

The expressional activity was the building and furnishing of a doll's house, which was afterward sent to the children's ward of the nearest city hospital. The house was made of heavy paste-board boxes, four rooms—living-room, dining-room, kitchen, and bedroom. The rooms were papered with remnants of wall paper furnished by the children, with borders of simple design of gummed parquetry paper. Pictures were sup-

plied from the children's collections of post cards. Furniture was folded from the regular heavy kindergarten folding paper. Candy boxes supplied window glass and window curtains, dishes, bedding, draperies; and paper doilies served as table covers. Rugs were woven from felt, the strips being an inch wide in colors to match the wall-paper borders on a gray background. Fireplace and chimneys were covered with brick paper from a catalogue cover. Three tiny dolls were dressed to represent father, mother, and baby. The constructive work was divided among the lessons as follows:

Lesson 1. Proposal of plan and call for material.

Lesson 2. Planning of house.

Lesson 3. Living-room furnishings.

Lesson 4. Stove, fireplace, chimneys.

Lesson 5. Windows, curtains, lamps from wooden beads and tiny candles.

Lesson 6. Dining-room furnishings.

Lesson 7. Kitchen furnishings and dishes.

Lesson 8. Bedroom furnishings.

Lessons 9 and 10. Dressing dolls.

Lessons 11, 12, 13. Finishing touches.

Of course much of the work had to be done by the teacher between Sundays.

In addition to the house-building each child was given an appropriate picture to paste into an album each Sunday.

With the coming of Easter thought was turned to the awakening of nature. For the Easter story itself Hans Andersen's story of "The Flax" was used, slightly adapted by the introduction of such phrases as "How good God is!" in the flax's expressions of happiness.

The aim of such lessons was to broaden the pupil's sympathies to in-

clude the nature-world, and to train him to see God as the Creator and Father of nature as well as man. All the material used in this course was at the pupil's door, in constant sight and sound. It was the teacher's task to bring it into the focus of observation, interpreting it, and filling it with the thought of God.

The nature-lessons were as follows:

Lesson 1. The Sun, bringing back warm weather. Illustrated by a globe, candle for the sun, and diagram of the earth's orbit. Handwork: Poster picture, sky, grass, sun, birds, flowers.

Lesson 2. Spring Flowers. Parts of plant with especial emphasis on bulbs to account for the flower's early appearance. Illustrated by spring beauty and dog-tooth violet plants entire, to show depth of bulb in the ground. Handwork: Drawing a spring beauty plant.

Lesson 3. Tadpoles. Material, specimens of eggs and small tadpoles. Picture illustrating life-history. Handwork: Making of a similar picture by cutting out, coloring, and pasting, outlined egg, tadpole, and frog. These were outlined on brown wrapping paper, making less coloring necessary. For the next eight weeks until he was a fully developed frog the tadpole came to Sunday school, that the children might see how "God had helped him to grow" during the week.

Lesson 4. Fruit Blossoms. Fertilization by insects. Handwork: Coloring and pasting blue print of cherry blossoms. As these blue prints were frequently used, the method of making them may be described. The plant to be outlined is placed in a printing frame with blue-print paper, exposed to the light for a few seconds, and the print

washed in clear cold water in which it must remain at least half an hour.

Restlessness was relieved in this lesson by taking the children into the churchyard for a short interval between the presentation of the lesson and the handwork, where some of the children played they were flowers, while the others as bees and butterflies flitted from one flower to another.

The cherry-tree babies, like the tadpoles, were taken to Sunday school each Sunday until they had fully developed.

Lesson 5. Arrangement of tree branches to give leaves light. Blackboard illustrations, and a very young maple tree. Handwork: Drawing of the maple tree.

The children were requested to collect various shapes of leaves and bring for the next lesson.

Lesson 6. Leaves. Function, arrangement, shape. Handwork: Tracing and coloring of a leaf.

During these lessons the memory verse used each Sunday had been, "O God, how wonderful are your works; in wisdom have you made them all." Typewritten copies of the following verses were given out to be learned during the next five weeks.

All things bright and beautiful  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful  
The Lord God made them all.

He gave us eyes to see them  
And lips that we might tell  
How good is God our Father  
Who has made all things well.

Lesson 7. First Animal Life. Amoebae (blackboard drawings), sponges, snails, fish—specimens of last three

present. Connection with last lesson—dependence of animal world on plants for food. Handwork: Freehand cutting of fish from gold paper, since our specimen was a goldfish.

Lesson 8. Water-Story. The Rain-drop's journey adapted from Poulsson's *In the Child's World*. Handwork: Illustration of story by poster picture of colored paper—blue sea and sky, sun, white clouds, rocks on edge of sea with gray sky above, rain marked with pencil. In these poster pictures, the pieces were cut beforehand, and simply pasted in place by the children.

Lesson 9. Soil-making. Story, Stony and Rocky adapted from *In the Child's World*. Handwork: Coloring and pasting of blue prints of grass in soil.

Lesson 10. Earthworms. A specimen apiece was furnished in a jelly glass with a little earth, that the children might see them burrow. Handwork: Drawing of earthworms stretching their bodies out of their holes to find food. Children played this just before drawing.

Lesson 11. Dandelion Seeds. Story, a paraphrase of the parable of the Sower, using natural agencies throughout instead of human. The children were taken into the yard and the story dramatized. Handwork: Coloring of blue print of dandelion gone to seed.

Lesson 12. Birds. Spring migration and nest-building. Specimens of abandoned nests; one in its bush. Lesson dramatized outdoors. Handwork: Coloring Audubon bird picture. New memory verses:

Who taught the bird to build her nest  
Of wool and hay and moss?  
Who taught her how to weave it best,  
And lay the twigs across?

'Twas God who showed them all the way  
And gave their little skill.  
He teaches children, when they pray,  
To do His holy will.

Lesson 13. Birds. Brooding and feeding of young. Lesson dramatized outdoors. Story, The Great White Owl from *Among the Forest People*. Handwork: Coloring bird picture.

Lesson 14. Birds. Young birds' education. Story, The Young Robin Who Was Afraid to Fly, from *Among the Meadow People*. Handwork: Coloring Audubon bird picture.

Lesson 15. Birds' Clothes. Handwork: Coloring Audubon bird picture.

Lesson 16. Adult birds' food and home. Handwork: Coloring picture.

Lesson 17. Birds—How They Are Made. Had a canary present. Coloring Audubon picture.

In all these lessons on birds, Olive Thorne Miller's *First Book of Birds* was closely followed.

Lesson 18. Grasshoppers, Locusts, Crickets. Material, a specimen apiece in jelly glass with a few blades of sprinkled grass, specimens of molts, and enlarged pictures from *National Geographic Magazine*. Handwork: Drawing picture to illustrate this, a new memory verse—grass, sky, tree, whatever the children choose to add.

Up in the tree-top, down on the ground,  
High in the blue sky, far, all around,  
Near by, and everywhere, creatures are  
living.  
God in his goodness something is giving.

Lesson 19. Butterflies. Material, larvae, empty chrysalis, and specimen of black swallowtail. Lesson dramatized. Handwork: Coloring of out-

lines of leaf with egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly.

Lesson 20. Ants. Material, ant's nest in slate according to directions in Hodge's *Nature Study and Life*, a book which was of the greatest assistance throughout. Lesson dramatized. Handwork: Drawing of ant-hill.

Lesson 21. Spiders. Material, webs mounted between glass, bag of eggs, enlarged pictures from *National Geographic Magazine*. Story, Mother Spider from *The Children's Hour*. Handwork: Drawing spider web.

Lesson 22. Fall flowers contrasted with spring ones. Handwork: Drawing of sunflower. New memory verses:

Every little floweret  
Which growing up you see,  
Every little pink shell  
You've gathered from the sea.

Every little songster  
That sings up in the sky,  
Every little insect,  
Wasp, bee, or butterfly.

Every little thing that lives  
In earth, or sea, or air,  
God has made and watches o'er  
With loving, tender care.

Lesson 23. Weeds. Qualities which enable them to grow in spite of adverse conditions. "Selfishness" contrasted with cultivated flower or vegetable. Handwork: Coloring of outlines of onion, plantain, chrysanthemum. Question, Which would you rather be?

Lesson 24. Frost. Effect on different kinds of vegetation—grapevine, plantain, mullein, chrysanthemums, grass, of which specimens were shown. Lesson: Hard conditions develop character. Handwork: Frost landscape, blue sky,

yellow sun, green grass in crayons. Cover grass thinly with paste and sprinkle with diamond dust for frost. This lesson came after three beautiful white frosts in one week.

Lesson 25. Autumn Leaves. Work of leaves. Making food for plant in summer, making blanket for plant during winter. Leaves do the work God has given them. Handwork: Drawing of autumn branch with help of leaf stencils.

Lesson 26. Plants' Preparation for Winter. Material, specimen of beggar's tick, golden rod, and maple seeds. Handwork: Planting bulbs of Easter flowers to be raised to decorate the church at Easter.

Lesson 27. Animals' Preparation for Winter. Review of animals studied. Story, The Squirrels from *All the Year Round—Autumn*. Handwork: Coloring outline squirrel with nut in his paws.

The collections of the summer months were devoted to the Fresh-Air Camp maintained by the near-by city. One Sunday was devoted to a trip to see it, the children being transported in automobiles loaned by parents.

November was devoted to a study of food on the lines of the winter work on shelter and clothing.

Lesson 1. Cereals. Story of a wheat plant suggested by Mark 4:8; John 12:24. The whole process from sowing to bread was entirely familiar to most of the children. Handwork: Drawing of a wheat field.

Lesson 2. Fruits and Vegetables. Handwork: Drawing of three bins filled with apples, pumpkins, and potatoes respectively.

Lesson 3. Meat. Handwork: Coloring outline of a pig.

Lesson 4. Imported articles of food.  
Handwork: Poster picture of a ship.  
Eating of stuffed dates and figs.

The memory verses for these four lessons were those of the well-known hymn:

We plough the fields and scatter  
The good seed on the land,  
But it is fed and watered  
By God's almighty hand.

On the last Sunday, a collection of fruit and vegetables was made for a poor family recommended by the city Associated Charities, a family "who had no chance to raise anything, and not much money to buy with."

December was devoted to Christmas, the aim of the lessons being to inspire in the children the spirit of giving. An effort was made also to give the children a little idea of Jesus, as one who told people what they did not know before, that God was their Father and loved them, and wanted them to love and help each other; also that he showed them how to love God and each other. Christmas is his birthday and in memory of him we send presents to those we love. Handwork: Simple presents for the parents from holiday sewing cards.

The second lesson was the story of Jesus' boyhood, emphasizing his home life and his desire to learn about God as shown in the journey to Jeru-

salem, and in the lessons about God he learned from nature as we had done in the summer. The sewing cards were finished.

The third lesson was an adaptation of the legend of St. Nicholas. It was proposed that we play Santa Claus to a sick child, who had been recommended by the visiting nurses of the near-by city. A set of puzzle pictures was made by pasting suitable pictures on box covers, and slicing them.

The fourth lesson was the story of the first Christmas trees from *Why the Evergreen Trees Never Lose Their Leaves* from the *Book of Nature Myths*. The ending was adapted by saying that as a reward for the evergreens' kindness to the little bird, God said they might keep their leaves and be beautiful green Christmas trees to make the children happy. Decorations for a small artificial Christmas tree were made, and the tree trimmed. The tree and pictures were delivered anonymously on Christmas eve by the teacher.

No definite report of the results of the year's work can be given, yet I have felt that they were satisfactory in the case of my own four-year-old daughter who was in the class. A constantly increasing enrolment and a high average of regularity in attendance may perhaps be considered an indication of a more than ordinary interest in the Sunday-school lesson.